



# Echoes Of Belonging: Cultural Memory And Jewish Identity In Esther David's Portrayal Of The Bene Israel

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**Abstract:** This paper explores the representation of the Bene Israel Jewish community in Esther David's novels *The Walled City* and *Shalom India Housing Society*, highlighting her nuanced portrayal of cultural identity, tradition, and adaptation within the Indian sociocultural landscape. Through these works, David captures the distinctiveness of the Bene Israel—a small yet resilient Jewish group rooted in India—emphasizing how they preserve their religious practices, customs, and festivals while integrating seamlessly into a diverse and predominantly non-Jewish environment. *The Walled City* delves into the protagonist's personal journey through a patriarchal, tradition-bound Jewish household in Ahmedabad, reflecting on generational tensions and the struggle for female autonomy. In contrast, *Shalom India Housing Society* presents a broader communal lens, portraying the lives of Bene Israel Jews in a post-2002 Gujarat riot setting, addressing issues of security, identity, and cultural survival. Both novels illustrate the community's efforts to maintain their Jewishness amid modernity, marginalization, and migration pressures. Esther David's work not only preserves the memory of a fading community but also reclaims space for Indian Jews in the literary and cultural discourse of India.

**Keywords:** cultural identity, tradition, ethnography and migration

## INTRODUCTION

In addition to being incredibly rich, the history of the Jewish people extends back to the time of the Bible. They progressively developed their own set of values, traditions, and ceremonies that set them apart from other countries. Jews have traditionally served as both defenders and those in need of protection. They are one of the few ancient groups that have lived through hundreds of years of war, oppression, and being spread out across the world. Jews preserved their Jewish identity wherever they moved, while also adopting some local rituals and traditions. Most Indian Jewish groups, including Bene Israel, Cochin Jews, Bene Ephraim, and Bene Menashe, have perished.

## PORTRAYAL OF BENE ISRAEL

The Bene Israel ("Children of Israel") is a historic community of Jews in India whose ancestors had settled in India many centuries ago. In the early eighteenth century, an Indian Jew named David Rahabi discovered the Bene Israelis in their villages and recognized their unique Jewish customs. Some historians believed that their ancestors may have belonged to one of the Lost Tribes of Israel, but the Bene Israel have never been officially recognized by Jewish authorities as such. The Bene Israel claim that they are members

of “lost” tribes that reached India around 175 B.C. According to their legacy, their ancestors were shipwrecked off at the Konkan Coast and lost all their holy books; they only remembered the ‘Shema’, the Jewish prayer expressing faith in God. They lived among the Hindus and adopted several of the Hindu customs.

Esther David gives a different look at Indian Jewish life by emphasizing on the Bene Israel group and how they have kept their Jewish identity while adapting to India's wide range of cultures. Jews have easily added parts of Indian culture to their daily lives since they got here, even if their rules, holidays, and rituals have stayed the same. They have adapted to the changes while keeping their Jewish history.

There are certain rituals which Bene Israel Jews are following since their arrival to India. They observed Sabbath which starts from Friday and ends after sunset on Saturday. During Sabbath they were seen to pray and taking off from work. In Judaism, idol worship is a religious taboo but Bene Israel had a special excuse in this law. As they had lost all the scriptures and other important sources in shipwreck, they sustained on little knowledge about their culture passing down to generations. Bene Israelis also circumcise their sons on eighth day of their birth to have a connection with God and follow certain dietary laws. They don't eat certain animals which are not kosher and eat kosher meat only. They don't mix dairy products and meat and eat fish only with scales.

The title of the novel *The Walled City* is set in Ahmedabad, India. The novel begins in the 1940s and David describes it as a city of fourteen gates with its dryness and the aroma of dying fragrance of the mango trees. *The Walled City* (1997) by Esther David is a novel that revolves around the lives of Bene Israel women who are in quest of their self-identities, the novel also portrays the lives of three generations of women. David portrays them as noteworthy as they struggle to carve out a place of their own in the patriarchal Jewish community. In this novel, David throws light on the identity crises experienced by her characters, she remarks that “They all go through the period of crisis, while some remain firm, and others crumble under pressure. The protagonist has two different identities in the novel, first as a daughter and second as a Jew. As a daughter, the protagonist is filled with the spirit of rebellion. She wants to escape from the shackles and norms laid by her mother (TWC 91- 92) therefore she sets out to create her own identity. She first breaks the ritual of bathing, „For the first time I am alone with my body. I let the water flow over me and I am a nymph under the waterfall. I am the rose of Sharon, and the lily of the valley” (TWC 84-85).

Esther David unveils the way Bene Israelis have blurred the difference between “Prophet” and “God” and how they have adapted to Indian ways of Idol worship; the narrator shares the events of love, passion, and the loneliness of the members of the Shalom Housing Society. It portrays different stories about a group of Jews who live together in an apartment complex which they built together, after the riots in 1950, David portrays her protagonists who deal with the intermingling spaces of traditional and modernist ethos, women trying to grapple with it to find their identity. Her writings steadily and firmly argue for the values like “freedom of thought”, “expression” “liberation from oppression” and “equality as a quest for dignity”. These are her prime moves of her imagination and creativity. In words of Esther David, ‘For years, they had lived in these bustling streets with Hindu, Muslim, Parsi and Christian families. Then the riots had stuck like the plague.’ [SIHS 8]

Though India enjoys unity in diversity; it is always contained within it a mosaic of different religions, castes, creeds and languages. The people of the land are known for their warmth and hospitality. Bene Israel Jews, who once lived in India in substantial numbers have received and experienced this hospitality as an integral part of the country for centuries. Although Jews had their share of bitter experiences in the other parts of the world, India proved to be different from those countries, by accepting the Jews like other ethnic groups who came to India, with an open heart. Esther David in all her novels has captured this spirit of bonhomie, which has been enjoy(ed) by the Bene Israel Jews in a secular India. Esther David emerged as one of the most significant voices in the domain of Indian English fiction with the publication of her first novel *The Walled City* in 1997. She has the unique distinction of being the Bene Israel Indian woman novelist on the Indian English literary scene. Esther David has created a deep impact on her readers through her technique of strong characterization. She is a marvel at telling multiple stories which are inter connected, and set in a fictional place. She creates a voice for women. Even though she limits her writing to the description of Bene Israel women and their married lives, her appeal is universal. Her work has a strong realistic base and reflects not only her autobiographical themes but also the lost heritage of Bene Israel Jews who tentatively disappeared from India.

Sense of belonging is always present in Diaspora. Home becomes their distant memory. Bene Israel Jews also had a longing for returning to Promised Land. Their return had become a distant dream as India had given them opportunity for development. There is a confusion and fear in diasporic communities all over the world. However, Bene Israel Jews considered Indian land as their ancestral land and Israel as their Promised Land to return. So they had a clear idea of identity. The people, who wished to remain in India, followed their

ancestral religious culture in India by becoming a separate sect as Indian Jews. They are hybrid of Jewish and Indian culture. They are assimilated Indian Jews included in Indian multicultural society.

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